

SEWERAT

By London Homer-Wambeam

For every child lost in the city, a Sewerat is born. If you talk to any person walking the city streets, they will deny the stories everyone knows, but they would be lying if they say they didn't believe them. No one denies the children are taken. The elephant in the room is that the children are taken to the sewers.

Rachvis Obolis was retiring later than she would have liked. The real brutes of the Obolis pack sometimes retired as early as ten years old, but Rachvis had stalled, and was only now getting to her number eight and she was already fifteen. The Sewerats are given eight tasks. The more tasks they have completed the more respected they become, and once they have finished all eight of them, they are allowed to leave the sewers. The Ratmaster told her she was lazy, but she preferred being called lazy to a coward, which was what she really was.

She rested for a few moments in her pipe which served as her bed and then slid out into the main sleeping area, stepping around other pipes as she tied back her forever matted hair. Her shoes scraped softly through the grit on the concrete floor, as she tried not to wake the others. Never her friends, just the others. Rachvis was still tugging at her tangled hair as she stepped into the flickering lights of the connecting tunnel. Thankfully, the sleeping area was far away from the smell of the sewers, at least, as far away as you could be under the city.

Rachvis reached the door of the Ratmaster and knocked. Now that she was a number eight she could talk to the strange old man directly. Inside, a man in his thirties sat behind a desk, staring hard at a spot somewhere above Rachvis' head. Rachvis always felt he had a particular dislike of her. When she stepped closer his eyes snapped to her face and he opened his mouth to talk. A raspy sound came from his throat and he cleared it loudly.

"Yes, Rachvis, right? I know you know what's next. Just get a kid and bring it back. I would suggest starting in the tramstops. Lots of folks out in the open there."

Rachvis looked at her muck covered shoes, "Sir, I know you don't usually make exceptions, but isn't it just wrong to steal children? We are above quota this month anyhow. Maybe I could just, you know, leave early?"

"I never make exceptions, girl. Get a child, bring it back, then you leave. Got me? Any kid'll do, hell, have it yourself for all I care! But do it fast unless you want to end up like old Gernonon. Actually, I'm sure he would be happy to have the company of another old rat. Get out of my office, and don't come back until you have the kid."

Rachvis started to speak but the Ratmaster pointed forcefully at the door. She left the office and walked towards the nearest tram stop. She climbed down a ladder, slid aside a metal sheet and carefully stuck her head down first to make sure there wasn't a tram coming, then lowered herself down until her feet found the ceiling rungs and climbed across the ceiling and down the side of the tunnel. Rachvis slipped into an inset in the wall and waited. The noise of the underground tramstop echoed down the tunnel from her left, and she supposed she could go over there, but it was a popular station

and there might be Suits there to get her. She would tramsnatch a few stops instead and get to a shabbier stop.

A tram started to approach the station and the pebbles on the ground started shaking and the tracks vibrated. The tram came to a screeching halt at the station and The passengers shoes clanged loudly on the threshold as they boarded. "Doors closing...please stand back" came the machine voice, and the engines started to wine again. Bright lights hit Rachvis in the face and the tram rounded the corner, steadily building speed. Rachvis waited until the gap had reached the nearest pipe and she leaped, landing in the gap between two cars.

She stopped to catch her breath, peering into the car. Two small children stared back. This was her chance. She reached for the door handle and stopped. She peeked inside the car again. The children looked at her innocently. One of them laughed at something the other said and they both grinned at her. Next to them sat a woman who must have been their mother. The woman did not see Rachvis but faced forward, slowly brushing her child's hair. Did Rachvis have a mother once who petted her hair? Maybe siblings, too?

It wasn't fair. Why should these children be so lucky as to grow up with a caring mother and she lived beneath the sewers her whole life? If she had to ruin one of their childhoods to save the rest of her life, she would. So Rachvis turned the latch of the door open and stepped into the car. The only people inside were the mother with her children and a sleeping man. The mother cringed away from her, terrified and clutching her children. Rachvis strolled forwards and glared down disgustedly at the three of them. "Don't struggle, you'll only get hurt"

She snatched up the little girl who giggled, glad to meet this mysterious person she had watched out the window. The mother cried and begged for Rachvis to return her child, but Rachvis simply turned her back and drew a ragged breath. Now the mother tried to stop her physically, and as the woman scratched her face, Rachvis wondered if her mother had tried to protect her when she had been taken. Everything seemed to be moving slowly and quietly as though someone had drowned the world in sludge. Rachvis left the car and jumped back into the world below. The trip back was smooth, only hindered by Rachvis' small crying ticket to freedom.

Rachvis didn't knock, but simply walked into the Ratmaster's office. She dumped the now sleeping child on the desk. It had cried after she took it away from its mother, but had fallen asleep during the long journey home. Home. The sewers were the child's home now. Even if she wanted to return it there was no way she could find the mother, what with the number of children the city lost.

The Ratmaster jumped up in his seat at the appearance of a child sleeping uncomfortably on his desk, and then, still watching the baby, said, "Rachvis, is this... I see you brought me a child."

Rachvis glared at him sullenly, "That is what I was supposed to do, right? Every Sewerat brings you a child before they leave."

The Ratmaster still seemed surprised for some reason. "No, I don't suppose they do. In fact, you are the first one I've had do it, and I believe that means you deserve something special."

"I just want to leave the sewers."

“Not quite yet my dear, you see, I was not the first Ratmaster. I stole a child, see, just like you, and brought it back. Everyone else, they all chicken out and run away to the free world. But the first person to bring that Ratmaster a child...They become the new Ratmaster.”

Rachvis face turned to horror as she comprehended what he was saying. “You mean, I’m the new Ratmaster?”

“Yes, quite, and I can finally leave.”

“I won’t do it, find someone else”

“I don’t care what you do, but I’m no longer in charge. I wouldn’t suggest running though, you’ve already ruined one child’s day, don’t abandon fifty more.” The Ratmaster was already putting his coat on and heading for the door, “Also, every time one of the children is sent to do their number eight and runs away instead, you’ll have to kidnap a new kid to replace them. If one of them actually succeeds, then they are the new Ratmaster. And I don’t suggest you ‘forget’ because then our little Obolis pack will be taken over by the Nevercons or the Bilebards, and that would not be pretty. I hate to see children kill each other.”

“There must be some other way! We can help them escape!” Rachvis protested.

The Ratmaster smirked “Listen girl, there is now ‘we,’ just embrace it. Take care of that little one. I remember when you were a wee thing like that. Your father put up quite the fight. It got me this job, and I’m glad you’re taking it from me. Good luck Rachvis.”

Rachvis stared at the door for a long time. She walked behind the desk and sat down. *My father put up a fight for me.* She thought.